

APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES PATENT

TITLE OF INVENTION

**SPORTS THEME GAMING APPARATUS AND
METHOD FOR PLAYING THE SAME**

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CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 60/403,842, filed August 16, 2002.

STATEMENT AS TO RIGHTS TO INVENTIONS MADE UNDER FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

(Not applicable)

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

(1) Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to gaming methods and apparatus of the slot machine type, and more particularly to an improved gaming apparatus that incorporates a sports theme with a slot machine apparatus, with ancillary table game participation also possible on the machine.

(2) Background Information

Gambling and games of chance are popular sources of entertainment for many people. Such games of chance are more enjoyable if a variety of different gaming apparatus are available to the player. New forms of gaming apparatus and new methods of playing existing games can generate new interest and enthusiasm in this activity.

There are several reasons why slot machines are an ever-increasing factor relating to a casino's overall financial success. Increased competition in the casino industry has prompted operators and owner to bring more and newer types of slot machines into their establishments at a much higher rate, and much sooner, than they had at any time throughout the history of the slot machine. Also, today's casino

players are more sophisticated, and thus demand more challenging game environments, such as games that are connected or related to other casino games. Simply put, there is a high demand for a new generation of gaming equipment with new and unique features.

Historically, slot machines were of the three-window configuration, with three vertically oriented wheels rotating independently of one another behind three horizontally arranged windows. Typically, each wheel included 10 separate symbols, which would then be aligned horizontally within the windows. The consumer would “win” based upon the particular arrangement of symbols in the three windows.

This game was then augmented by providing three horizontal rows of windows, with possible paylines horizontally along any of the three rows, or diagonally. This in turn was augmented with additional windows in each horizontal row, with the most known to the inventor to be three rows of five windows. However, some recent new slot designs which display five or more windows are considered more confusing than fun. This is especially true of those games where a payline is not a straight horizontal, vertical or diagonal line, but rather weaves up and down among the horizontal rows of windows from side to side.

One attempt to overcome this problem is set out in US Pat. No. 6,241,607 to Payne et al., wherein a non-rectangular and/or non-orthogonal arrangement of gambling elements are disclosed. While this patent addresses some of the problems of prior art devices, it is believed that the non-rectangular arrangement of elements

detracts from the simplicity of prior art straight line horizontal and vertical paylines with only two diagonal paylines.

It is also desirable to introduce a table game environment to slot machines, to take advantage of the popularity of both types of games in a single apparatus.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is therefore a general object of the present invention to provide an improved method and gaming apparatus which incorporates a sports theme in a plurality of slot machines.

A further object of the present invention is to provide a method and gaming apparatus which provides the additional aspects of a table game to a slot machine.

Yet another object is to provide a method and gaming apparatus that is simple to play, and provides a possible progressive jackpot.

Still a further object of the present invention is to provide a slot machine arrangement that provides multiple straight horizontal and vertical paylines on a convention rectangular arrangement, but enhances the gaming experience with additional payline possibilities.

These and other objects will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

The gaming apparatus of the present invention includes a housing with a front operable surface and a visual display region thereon. The visual display region includes a plurality of windows disposed in a rectangular positional array of four rows and four columns with a plurality of paylines defined by a line intersecting four adjacent

elements in a single row, column or diagonal on the array. A button or mechanical arm on the housing will cause all of the symbols in the array to be randomly selected and displayed as part of a gaming sequence. A payout is generated if one or more of the selected paylines contain a predetermined number of predetermined symbols. The housing further includes three additional screen displays of various table games, for potential play if a winning combination is achieved in the main window.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

The preferred embodiment of the invention is illustrated in the accompanying drawings, in which similar or corresponding parts are identified with the same reference numeral throughout the several views, and in which:

Figure 1 is a depiction of a prior art three-reel game having multiple paylines;

Figure 2 is a schematic depiction of a ten-reel embodiment of a prior art multiple reel, multiple payline non-rectangular game;

Figure 3 is a perspective view of an arrangement of a bank of slot machines of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a plan view of the arrangement of slot machines of Figure 3; and

Figure 5 is an elevational view of the operating surfaces of a slot machine of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to the drawings, in which similar or corresponding parts are identified with the same reference numeral, and more particularly to Figure 1, a prior art slot machine of the type having three rows of three windows 12 with three vertically oriented reels 14 disposed behind the windows. Each reel 14 has a plurality of symbols 16 printed thereon, arranged for display through a window 12. The reels 14 are individually driven and selectively and independently stopped by a drive system 18. As shown in Figure 1, five individual paylines are indicated by Roman numerals I-V.

Figure 2 depicts a second prior art slot machine of the type having a non-rectangular arrangement of windows 20. This device includes 10 reels 22 having a plurality of symbols thereon for display through an associated window 20. Reels 22 are individually driven and selectively and independently stopped by drive system 24. The triangular arrangement of windows 20 offers three horizontal paylines I, II and III, three vertical paylines IV, V and VI, three leftward inclined paylines VII, VIII and IX, and three rightward inclines paylines X, XI and XII. The apparatus of Figure 2 also provides a plurality of buttons 26 for selecting paylines, and a plurality of buttons 28 for selecting various outcome opportunities.

Referring now to Figure 3, the gaming apparatus of the present invention is designated generally at 30, with individual machines 32 arranged in a generally rectangular configuration having the operating surfaces 34 and 36 facing outwardly. In the preferred embodiment of the invention, each machine will have a sports theme

of one of a plurality of individual sports. For example, Figure 4 shows an arrangement of twelve slot machines, with six different sports themes, namely, basketball, soccer, football, hockey baseball and golf. Obviously other types of sports themes may be used, depending upon the region in which the gaming apparatus is located, to allow for local sports that are more popular than those specifically presented in the drawings.

A support stand 34 is centered among the machines 32, to support an ancillary display board 36 above the bank of machines 32. Ancillary board 36 is a large horizontally oriented wheel with a vertical display 38 around its periphery that is operable to display data regarding a progressive jackpot or the like, so that patrons around the entire bank of machines 32, and in the entire casino, may easily view the results.

Each machine 32 is identical, except for the particular sports theme displayed on the machine, and therefore only one machine will be described in detail herein. Each slot machine 32 preferably has a sloped face 40 and a vertical face 42 which together form the operating surfaces of the machine.

Referring now to Figure 5, the operating surfaces 40 and 42 of one machine 32 are shown in more detail. Upper operating surface 42 includes three main display regions 44, 46 and 48. Region 44 displays a representation of a craps table, with a screen to show an animated game, or a video-linked game. Region 46 displays a representation of a blackjack table, with a screen to show an animated game, or a video-linked game. Region 48 is used for the display of a roulette wheel. This may

either be a conventional animated display, or the horizontally-oriented roulette wheel 50 shown in Figure 5. The version shown in Figure 5 has a portion projecting from the face and the "slots" arranged vertically for display.

Lower operating surface 40 includes a large display screen 52, with a rectangular arrangement of sixteen windows 54. Each window 54 has a reel or other apparatus for randomly generating and displaying a symbol within the window. While the particular symbols are not specifically depicted in figure 5, the symbols are all related to the particular sport which is represented by the particular machine 32. Thus, if the sport depicted by machine 32 of Figure 5 was football, the symbols may include a football, an official indicating a touchdown, a quarterback passing the ball, a player running with the ball, a field goal kicker, and various penalties, interceptions and other "bad" things that may occur in the game.

Because each window is individually operable to display a random symbol, there are 10 very simple and straight-forward paylines for the patron to view. Paylines I, II, III and IV are conventional horizontal paylines. Paylines V, VI, VII and VIII are vertical paylines. Paylines IX and X are the two diagonals of the arrangement.

It can be seen that the possible paylines are dramatically improved over the conventional nine-window arrangement of the prior art, shown in Figure 1. Also, the rectangular arrangement of the inventor's 4x4 arrangement of windows dramatically improves the ease of determining winning paylines, as compared to the numerous diagonals and different numbers of windows in a line, of the prior art non-rectangular

arrangement shown in Figure 2. The patron is most familiar with the horizontal and two-diagonal paylines of prior art machines, and can easily view vertical paylines, for the same reason. It is therefore believed that the 4x4 arrangement of windows is a dramatic improvement over the prior art arrangements of windows.

An additional factor that enhances the play of the 4x4 arrangement of windows 54, is the relation of the symbols to a particular sport. This relation increases the recognition of winning combinations by a patron, since the patron will likely choose a machine depicting a sport with which the patron is familiar. In this way, the patron is not required to decipher confusing symbol combinations of lemons and cherries, bars and "7's". Rather, they can rely on their knowledge of the sport to more easily recognize a winning combination.

There are preferably four different levels of possible winning combinations: (1) very small, frequent rewards; (2) medium-size less frequent rewards; (3) a standard mini-jackpot (such as \$10,000); and (4) a large progressive jackpot. The four different levels of winning are directly related to the number of coins which a patron spends on each spin, with the higher rewards associated with more coins played. One example of a payout schedule is set forth in the following table. Note that the symbols described in the table relate to the game of football, as in the example described above.

<u>Symbols displayed in a paylin</u>	<u>Payout</u>
Four running plays	Small
Four passing plays	Small
3 of 4 footballs	Medium
Four field goals	Medium
4 touchdowns (paylines I-IX)	Large
4 touchdowns (payline X)	Mini-Jackpot
4 footballs (paylines I-IX)	1 of 3 Random Bonus Rounds
4 footballs (payline X)	Progressive Jackpot

It is preferred that the payouts be directly related to the number of coins that are spent by a patron on an individual round, with the higher possible payouts being only possible if the patron spends 3 or 4 coins on the round.

A plurality of selection buttons 60, individually identified as A-M, are provided on operating surface 40 below the display screen 52. Buttons 60 provide the patron with numerous possibilities for betting. For example, button H would permit the patron select a particular payline for a bet. Button J would permit the patron to select the amount of the bet. Button K would permit the patron to bet one credit on every payline. Button L would permit the patron to spin the reels (or to cause the machine to randomly change all of the symbols in the windows). Button M would permit the patron to repeat the last bet and spin the reels.

Buttons A-F are shaped differently, and intended to merely provide information to the patron. For example, button A would permit the patron to change a selection. Button B would display the past payouts. Button C would permit the patron to cash out. Button D would provide other related information about the game. Button E would permit the patron to obtain a credit voucher. Button F would be a "help" button.

Finally, button G would provide the spin for the bonus round, displayed in one of the three regions 44, 46 and 48 on the upper operable surface 42, when applicable. Obviously, the spin buttons could also be operated by an arm on the side of the machine, as in prior art mechanical slot machines, if the patron so desires.

It can be seen that there are essentially two types of winning combinations: a "win" relating to the symbols of the sport on an individual machine 32 (see Figures 3 and 4), which will be designated a "sporting win". Second there are opportunities to partake in the various table game activities displayed on the upper operating surface of each machine 32, which will be designated "interactive wins", because the patron will be able to extend play with a chance at larger payouts.

While the lower operating surface of a machine 32 is a stand-alone unit, it should be understood that all of the individual machines 32 of the arrangement 30 are linked to the progressive jackpot, as are any other arrangements of banks of machines locate in separate geographical locations (either on-site or off-site). An interactive win equates to an opportunity for the patron to participate in the simulation of a particular table game round. In the preferred embodiment, this table game round is automated,

and not interactive. In other words, once the patron has won an opportunity to partake in one of these table game venues, they merely sit back and watch to see if they win or lose.

It can therefore be seen that the method and apparatus of the present invention provides the patron with numerous variables in wagering and possible winning combinations, without requiring the patron to follow weaving paylines or unusual and unaccustomed angles to determine if they have received a winning combination.

Whereas the invention has been shown and described in connection with the preferred embodiments thereof, many modifications, substitutions and additions may be made which are within the intended broad scope of the appended claims.